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ABSTRACT

A qualitative investigation of the professional development experiences of 17 prominent U.S. Latinas across 7 occupational fields is the subject of this paper. The investigation described here explored cultural, personal, and contextual variables in relation to the career development of Latinas; in addition, it included specific exploration of cultural identity and the work-family relationship. Although the primary focus is on specific methodological issues that arise when using a qualitative approach with Latinas, the paper concludes by discussing five tentative observations regarding the participants' career development: (1) the career paths of the women interviewed were not linear; (2) all but one of the participants spoke of one pivotal individual who had a positive influence in their lives and career self-efficacy; (3) all participants who had spouses or partners spoke highly of the support, understanding, and encouragement they received from their partners, regardless of the partner's ethnicity or race; (4) identity was a core issue for the women studied--being a woman and Latina were inextricably connected; and (5) invariably, the participants expressed instances of discouragement, neglect and prejudice from all echelons of the educational system. (TS)

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Career Paths of Highly Accomplished Latinas

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention

of the American Psychological Association

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Career paths of highly accomplished Latinas

Introduction

Women of color, and particularly Latinas, are severely underrepresented in the women's career development literature. The few studies which focus on Latino/Latina career development are primarily based on men, while the scant studies centering on Latinas directly or indirectly impose majority culture concepts and measures on the Latina experience. That is, because so little is known about the vocational psychology of Latinas, the use of predominantly quantitative strategies has limited investigators to testing hypotheses and using instrumentation developed on and by those in the majority culture. These studies leave many unanswered questions, such as: What are the perceived challenges to Latina career development within a majority culture? What have been the sources of encouragement and support for Latinas to succeed? In the face of sexism, racism and cultural pressure, how have highly accomplished Latinas coped and succeeded? Qualitative research strategies may offer a more appropriate approach to answering these questions because they often focus on creating theory from extensive interview data, rather than testing existing theory for "fit" using instrumentation which may have limited applicability to the population under investigation.

This presentation describes a qualitative investigation of the professional development experiences of 17 prominent U.S. Latinas across seven occupational fields. The study of highly achieving African-American and Caucasian women (Richie, Fassinger, Geschmay, Johnson, Prosser and Robinson, 1995), of which we heard earlier in this symposium, served

as a foundation for the present study. Like that inquiry, this study explored cultural, personal, and contextual variables in relation to the career development of Latinas. In addition, it included specific exploration of cultural identity and the work-family relationship, since these variables have been found to be particularly salient for Latinas (Amaro, Russo & Johnson, 1987; Segura, 1992). This presentation primarily focuses on the specific methodological issues that arise when using a qualitative approach with Latinas, including issues of language, interviewer characteristics, contact strategies, and using Latino/Latina cultural norms as a framework for developing a culturally sensitive methodological approach. Although we still are actively engaged in the data analysis process and it is therefore too premature to present detailed results, I will discuss some broad observations regarding the career behavior of the Latinas interviewed for this study.

Methodology

Data analysis is being completed following the procedure already outlined by Dr. Richie earlier in this symposium. As with that study, we have assembled a research team which is collectively involved in data analysis. The research team is composed of graduate and undergraduate Latina and non-Latina members in order to bring diverse perspectives to the data analysis process. In qualitative research, the researchers are immersed in a subjective process and therefore it is important to address continuously our biases. We have initially implemented this requirement by describing and documenting our biases prior to formally beginning data analysis. These biases included our preconceived notions of Latino/Latina culture and our perception of the career development process in general. In

addition, the researchers have been urged to keep journals or articulate their thoughts, ideas, and impressions during weekly research team meetings.

The primary instrument used in the present study was an interview protocol based on the Richie et al. (1995) protocol, modified by our research team after extensive literature review, consultation with Latina professionals, and a small pilot study. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants the opportunity to describe their experiences using their own words. Contacting the women, setting up the interview, and the interview itself were adapted to fit the context, environment, and individual, and I want to share some of these experiences with you today. Making allowances for the realities of Latino culture influenced the research process in multiple ways. Because qualitative approaches encourage this kind of adaptation, qualitative research seems particularly appropriate for this population.

Women were contacted by letter first, after which a number of follow-up calls were made. The women were responsive to the personal interaction and contact. Initially, several of the women wanted to speak to me directly before accepting participation in the study, asking me about my ethnic/cultural background, type of degree I am seeking, and goals of the investigation. These women wanted to know who the primary researcher and interviewer was, and what connection she has to the Latino community. Because building a trusting relationship is important in Latino culture, I realized that I needed to talk a little about myself and my background in future letters to potential participants. Because qualitative methodology is a dynamic process, I was able to implement immediately what we learned

about contacting participants into the methodology.

The title of this presentation is "Career paths of highly accomplished Latinas." As issues of sampling and representation arose in our team meetings, there was much debate as to the meaning of the term "highly accomplished." Questions were raised such as: Whose standards were being used when identifying "highly accomplished" women? Were we in danger of perpetuating the use of majority standards to investigate non-majority populations? Thus, after much thought and debate, the team chose to sample "notable" Latinas. These were women whose contributions on the local, national, or international level have had a visible impact in their respective occupational fields, their communities, or society at large. They were recognized as "notable" by a panel of eight distinguished Hispanic American women, who published a biographical directory entitled Notable Hispanic American Women (Telgen & Kamp, 1993). Thus, the women included in this study were chosen by a panel of their peers, rather than according to a EuroAmerican perspective of who is "notable." This sampling strategy led to the inclusion of women who may have been overlooked by majority culture standards, but who are quite prominent and successful within Latino communities. Such women included social activists and business women who have chosen to work primarily within their communities.

Because Latinos/Latinas are a highly heterogeneous group, achieving a representative sample of Latina subgroups was deemed important (Arbona, 1990). Therefore, an effort was made to interview Latinas whose heritage came from the Caribbean, Mexico, South America and Central America. Fifty-nine percent of the participants were Chicana or Mexicana, 18%

Puerto Rican, 12% South American, 6% Cuban, and one had both Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage. These percentages are close to representing U.S. Census figures of Latino subgroups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 1991).

The participants, who ranged in age from 34-60 years of age, were interviewed in Washington D.C., New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, and Chicago. This was purposeful, since it was important to interview these women in their contexts, and to use their environments as a source of data. This became, for me, an unexpectedly powerful research strategy. When I (as the interviewer and primary investigator) went to the barrios of Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Denver in order to interview some of the women, the barrio and their environment presented me with invaluable data, and helped me to better understand the sociopolitical context in which these women choose to work. For example, some of the Chicana/Mexicana participants are particularly mobilized by their experience of colonization. By personally observing and experiencing the second class citizenship that many Mexican Americans and Latinos have in the southwest, I was able to understand more deeply and clearly the experience of colonization. As one woman stated, "I could live anywhere, but I want to live in the barrio. I need to live in the barrio because this is the community where I do business." In contrast, going to an executive office placed another participant in a very different context. Their choices reflected their career paths, in that some women chose to empower Latinos by creating change within the Latino community while others attempted to change the perceptions of and opportunities for Latinos within majority culture organizations. These kinds of differences became apparent with the use of a

qualitative research approach, and may have been less observable using quantitative methodologies.

In each occupational area sampled in this study, an attempt was made to locate at least two women who broadly represented that area. The occupational areas represented in the study were: two business owners, two non-profit executives, two journalists, two educators, a dancer/choreographer and two visual artists, two public officials, a lobbyist and a women's rights social activist, and a scientist and an engineer. It is interesting to note, however, that most of the women described multiple roles in their professional lives. For example, one of the non-profit executives was also an educator and social activist; the visual artists viewed their art both as an art and as a tool of social transformation; and many of the women were heavily involved in social activism, education, and political lobbying.

Some Latino cultural values that influenced the research process

Because qualitative research is based on personal interactions, it allows for the inclusion of cultural norms as part of the methodology. I will now briefly describe how we included in our methodology our knowledge of some Latino cultural values, including: the centrality of relationships and collectivism, the importance of building trust, the social script of "simpatía," preferring close physical space and contact, the use of Spanish, and the concepts of familism and "respeto" or respect.

The centrality of relationships, building trust, and the social script of "simpatía". Social relations are important in Latino culture, such that high energy is placed on the maintenance of relationships above personal goals. The Latino social code of "simpatía,"

which could be translated as meaning "friendliness," requires that one conduct one self in an amicable, interested, and caring way. It emphasizes the need for behaviors that promote smooth, trusting and pleasant social relationships, and involves respect, affection, deep empathy for others' feelings, and the avoidance of interpersonal conflict (Marin & Marin, 1991).

My understanding of these social norms was conveyed in several ways: First, I used self-disclosure in the initial contact letter and allowed as much personal contact between myself and the participants throughout the research process as a way of creating a relationship based on trust. Second, when deemed appropriate, it was important for me to bring flowers or a small gift as a way of showing respect and appreciation. And third, I expected all interviews to begin with "la plática", or small talk, because small talk traditionally has been one form of conveying care and empathy (Marin & Marin 1991). Because small talk was built into the process, some of the interviews lasted between an hour and a half and two hours. During small talk some women showed me pictures of their family, others spoke to me in Spanish, while others spoke of Puerto Rico, what part of the island we were from, and where we had lived. In qualitative research, the researcher is part of the process and part of the data. It was more important for me to engage in small talk than to try and remain on task by being "neutral" or "consistent," as quantitative methodologies often require.

The preference for physical contact. Many Latinos prefer close physical contact and their sense of personal space is smaller than that of Anglo-Americans (Marin & Marin,

1991). It is not uncommon for Latinos to kiss and hug as we say hello and goodbye. This physical contact is a sign of "simpatía." In the present study, 13 out of the 17 interviews began with a handshake and ended with one or multiple hugs and kisses. Not only was it important for me to engage in such physical contact, but it felt natural and appropriate, since it was a sign that the relationship had been cemented. In the four cases where this did not occur, the women were in visible positions where hugging and kissing may have been viewed as inappropriate by others around us. It was important for me to be flexible and respect the code of social conduct these women had adopted in their work place.

The use of Spanish during the interviews. We felt it was important to allow participants the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings in either Spanish or English. We believed this freedom would allow for the spontaneous and immediate expression of true feelings, thoughts, and experiences. It was also important not to assume that all the women spoke both languages, so they were first asked if they spoke Spanish. If so, they were given the choice to speak in Spanish when they so desired. Even those who assured me they could express themselves fully in English occasionally used Spanish when describing some important feelings, phrases, or regional idioms; suggesting the importance of allowing participants the freedom to express themselves in their native language. Although I speak Spanish, I was limited by my lack of familiarity with certain regional idioms; reminding me, once again, of our vast heterogeneity and the complexity which this presents.

La familia: the importance of familism The family is central in Latino culture (Marin & Marin, 1991). It involves the individuals' strong identity with and attachment to the

nuclear or extended family, with strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among family members (Marin & Marin, 1991). When the participants were asked about their family, it was important to leave it open ended in order for them to define family as they wished. Frequently, the family was described as an extended network of kin who became part of the research process in numerous ways. For example, during one interview I spent one hour speaking with a husband while the participant arrived from another interview. It was important for me to follow the social script of "simpatía" and to build a relationship with her husband as well. During our interview, the husband offered us food and drink as his way of making me feel welcome.

I would like to end this section by describing to you an interview which illustrates the influence of the above Latino cultural values in our methodology. I had spoken with the participant several times on the telephone, answering many of her questions about the study and my career. When I arrived at her city of residence, she informed me that her father was having critical surgery the day of our scheduled interview, and requested that the interview be conducted in the hospital. Our window of opportunity was quite small, since she had to balance her family and work responsibilities with the interview. That day she was scheduled to pick up her siblings at the airport while tending to her mother and father at the hospital, and being on 24 hour call at work.

Knowing that I was going to meet the entire family, I knew I could not go empty handed because that would be a sign of disrespect. After purchasing food for the family and flowers for her father, I arrived at the hospital to find only her father was present. Despite

being strangers, we immediately began the "plática," or conversing amicably and heartily about his life and family until the participant arrived, at which point the participant and I retired to the visitor's lounge for the interview. When her mother appeared occasionally to bring us food, water, and conversation, we spoke in Spanish and practiced the social script of "simpatía." It was natural and important for me to speak with her mother during the interview, since showing respect to family members, and elders in particular, is important. The interview had a sense of congruence as I related to her family while the participant spoke at length about how her family is her central support system and inspiration. At the end of the interview, the entire family said goodbye with numerous rounds of embraces and kisses.

Tentative observations regarding participants' career paths

As previously mentioned, we are still analyzing data. However, I would like to conclude this presentation by describing five tentative observations regarding the participants' career development, based on my observations during the interviews. First of all, the career paths of these women were not traditionally linear. The collective history of the participants' career paths exhibited frequent lateral moves across professions and/or appointments. This may be due in part to the glass ceiling experienced by Latinas in most professional fields, or to the "choices" they have had to make as they attempt to balance family and work responsibilities. Their collective history also raises issues about the linear manner in which career development theories have been conceptualized. Future scholarly and research work may need to focus on the development and consequences of non-linear career paths.

Another tentative observation is that all women, with the exception of one, spoke of one pivotal individual who had a positive influence in their lives and career self-efficacy. These individuals were either a parent, teacher, professor, spouse, partner, or co-worker who supported, nourished and encouraged the talents of the participant, suggesting that mentors are very important in the career development of Latinas.

All women who had spouses or partners spoke highly of the support, understanding, and encouragement they received from their partners, regardless of the partner's ethnicity or race. The spouses of these women were individuals who shared most of the responsibility of the household, frequently being the designated parent who took care of child and home responsibilities. The women who were single reported being single because they had not met an individual who would be willing to assume this non-traditional, supportive role. Family was central to all women, regardless of how they defined the term "family." As with other women in past studies, all women spoke of the difficulty and stress inherent in balancing work and family responsibilities, despite having supportive partners.

A fourth observation is that identity was a core issue for these women. Being a woman and Latina were inextricably connected. Many felt they had to prove themselves twice as much because of their gender and ethnicity. Some women expressed having difficulty in being a female leader within the Latino community because of the traditional gender roles inherent in the culture. Some women felt they were discriminated against more because of their gender than because of their ethnicity. It was my observation that there seemed to be a connection between phenotype, or what we frequently denote as race, and

identification of discrimination, such that white Latinas seemed to identify gender as more salient and problematic than non-white Latinas; while non-white Latinas believed the combined effect of their race, ethnicity and gender produced greater discrimination. This is an example of how racial differences within the Latino community may have an impact on the career development and experience of Latinas.

Invariably, the participants expressed instances of discouragement, neglect and prejudice from all echelons of the educational system. However, as in the Richie et al. (1995) study, these women seemed to persevere despite obstacles, by passionately viewing barriers as opportunities rather than insurmountable problems. I would like to end by quoting one of the women in the study who particularly captures the collective spirit of the participants:

> "Always keep going forward. Don't look back. What happened yesterday is yesterday. You can't change that, it's done. Just move forward. Learn everything you can, and from every situation, see what's good in it. And always move forward."

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